**The European Union: Toward a “United States of Europe”?**

**After World War II, European leaders vowed to stop the endless cycle of wars on their continent. To achieve this goal, they began a process of economic and political unification that some hoped would lead to a “United States of Europe.”**

**The European Union**

The success of the Coal and Steel Community encouraged further economic and political unification in Western Europe. In 1957, the six member nations signed treaties in Rome that established the European Economic Community (EEC). The EEC created a much broader common market fostering the free movement of goods, services, workers, and capital investment across the borders of the member nations.

The EEC also set up a structure of political bodies, appointed by the six nations, to propose, approve, and rule on laws. Most of the political power, however, remained firmly in the hands of the national governments.

The EEC established a European Parliament. Member governments appointed all its representatives, and its power was limited. The Parliament could only express an opinion on proposed bills. The bills only became law when the Council of Ministers, representing the six national governments, approved.

With the limited power of the European Parliament, critics claimed the EEC had a “democratic deficit.” In other words, many resented that a small elite group of national government leaders was deciding the future of Europe rather than elected representatives of the European people.

The economic advantages of the European common market led to its enlargement (see box). Britain joined in 1973 mainly for economic reasons. It remained skeptical about further political union.

In 1979, the EEC held its first elections to choose members of the European Parliament. The following year, Parliament won authority to vote its opinion on proposed EEC laws before the Council of Ministers could act. This forced the Council to consider Parliament’s views and reduced the “democratic deficit.”

In 1992, the EEC members took a bold step to unify Western Europe both economically and politically. The treaty signed at Maastricht, a city in the Netherlands, created the European Union (EU). The Maastricht Treaty provided for European citizenship, handed more authority to Parliament, and reserved some policy areas like agriculture to the EU rather than to the member nations. Another agreement scheduled the transition to a single EU currency, the euro.

To become law, all member nations had to ratify the Maastricht Treaty by either parliamentary action or voter referendum. For the first time, the French, who had led the European unification process, expressed doubts about yielding more sovereignty to a stronger European organization. French voters barely approved the treaty in a referendum, 51 percent to 49 percent.

**What Is the EU Today?**

The European Union today consists of 25 member nations (see box). Recently, eight former communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe have joined the EU. Bulgaria and Romania are on track for admission in 2007. Turkey, a Muslim country with barely a toehold on the map of Europe, has also applied.

The EU is stronger and more democratic than it was when six nations established the European Economic Community in 1957. Yet, the EU is still not a federalized “United States of Europe.” Its main institutions consist of:

**The Commission:**Headed by 20 commissioners appointed to five-year terms by the national governments, the Commission has the sole authority to propose legislation. The Commission also consists of more than 20 departments that work with national governments to implement EU laws. This institution most reflects the desire for European unification.

**The Council of Ministers:** This body consists of top officials from the national governments with the exclusive authority to vote on EU legislation and policies. A few votes must be unanimous; some are by a simple majority; others require a weighted ballot based on national population. This institution most reflects the desire to retain national sovereignty.

**The European Parliament:** This one-house legislature has more than 600 members organized by political parties on a multinational basis. European citizens elect members for five-year terms. The Parliament, now considered a “co-decision maker” with the Council of Ministers, still cannot propose legislation. This is the most democratic EU institution.

**The European Court of Justice:** Consisting of 15 judges appointed by the national governments for six-year renewable terms, the court makes rulings on EU treaties and laws. It also decides disputes among EU institutions, member nations, corporations, and individuals. The court has significantly ruled that member nations have limited their own sovereignty in some areas, making EU treaties and legislation supreme over national constitutions and laws. This institution, in effect, has created a “supremacy clause,” which specifically appears in the U.S. Constitution (Article VI), but does not appear in any of the treaties that established the EU.

**The European Council:** National heads of government, foreign ministers, and representatives of the Commission meet two or more times a year to set the EU agenda. They may also override decisions of the Council of Ministers. This institution operates somewhat above the regular EU structure as a sort of “board of directors.”

A federal union is a political system of shared sovereignty with significant central government powers and others that the states exercise. The United States is a federal union. Most agree that the EU is not yet one. Its member nations have mainly given up only some economic authority to enjoy the benefits of a common market. The EU still has no elected president, no military force, no foreign policy, and no real power to enforce its laws.

Toward a “United States of Europe”?

Since World War II, Europe has grown more unified. There is, however, widespread disagreement today on the future of the European Union.

|  |
| --- |
| **EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER NATIONS**  **Original European Economic Community (EEC) Members (1957)**  [France](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/fr.html)  [Germany](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gm.html)  [Belgium](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/be.html)  [Luxembourg](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lu.html)  [Netherlands](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/nl.htmlhttps:/www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/nl.html)  [Italy](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/it.html)  **First Enlargement (1973)**  [Britain](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uk.html)  [Denmark](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/da.html)  [Ireland](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ei.html)  **Second Enlargement (1981)**  [Greece](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gr.html)  **Third Enlargement (1986)**  [Spain](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sp.html)  [Portugal](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/po.html)  **Fourth Enlargement (1995)**  [Austria](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/au.html)  [Finland](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/fi.html)  [Sweden](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sw.html)  **Fifth Enlargement (2004)**  [Czech Republic](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ez.html)          [Latvia](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lg.html)  [Poland](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pl.html)                        [Lithuania](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lh.html)  [Hungary](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/hu.html)                      [Slovakia](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lh.html)  [Estonia](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/en.html)                        [Cyprus](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cy.html)  [Slovenia](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/si.html)                      [Malta](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mt.html) |

In modern times, the sovereign nation-state has dominated Europe. Europeans who oppose a more federalized EU argue against surrendering their sovereignty to a bland and undemocratic “super state.” Margaret Thatcher, former prime minister of Great Britain, once described such a federal European Union as a “remote, centralized, bureaucratic” organization unaccountable to the people. “Euroskeptics” like Thatcher agree with the idea of a common market, but believe that European nations should always have the right to “opt out” of any EU law or policy.

Those favoring an EU along the lines of the United States say that the idea of opting out is a recipe for destroying the EU. Currently, the combined economies of the 25-member EU equal that of the United States. To oppose further unification, say the “Eurofederalists,” will dangerously weaken Europe in the new era of global competition.

In 2005, Europeans voted on a constitution for the European Union. The proposed constitution included reforms to make the EU more efficient and democratic. It was also widely viewed as opening the door toward more federalization. The constitution could only become law if every member nation ratified it.

The “Eurofederalists” were disheartened when voters in France and the Netherlands rejected the constitution. Opponents cited a range of reasons for sinking the constitution—high unemployment, cheap immigrant labor, the fear of losing farm subsidies, and hundreds of pages of technical and confusing language in the document itself.

Right now, the European Union will continue as it is currently structured. The people of Europe will have to decide what sort of EU they want. Should it continue as it now operates? Should it go backward to an association of cooperating sovereign nations? Or, should it become a federal union, a “United States of Europe”? Despite uncertainty about the future, the process of creating the European Union has already achieved its most important goal. Europeans today hold little doubt that war will never again tear Europe apart.

**For Discussion and Writing**

1.         Why did European leaders begin a process of economic and political unification after World War II?

2.         How has the European Court of Justice become a force for the federalization of Europe?

3.         Should the EU become the “United States of Europe”? How would “Euroskeptics” and “Eurofederalists” answer this question? What reasons would they give for their answers?

**A C T I V I T YTransatlantic Federal Union**

Should the United States give up some of its sovereignty to join the EU nations in a “Transatlantic Federal Union”? The chart below shows how such a federal system might divide and share powers between a “Transatlantic Authority” and “Member Nations.”

1.         Meet in small groups to discuss the question above.

2.         Each group should then report its conclusion along with the reasons for it to the rest of the class.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **POWERS OF TRANSATLANTIC AUTHORITY**  **Exclusive Powers**  Operation of a common market  Labor standards  Environmental protection  Immigration regulations  One currency  One postal service  Human rights enforcement  Supremacy of Transatlantic treaties and laws | **POWERS OF MEMBER NATIONS**  **Exclusive Powers**  Type of national government  Type of economic system  Regulation of businesses  Civil and criminal courts  Police  Education  Family law and social welfare  Control of domestic natural resources |
| **Shared Powers**  Citizenship  Taxation  Health care   Military force | |